Complex Culture

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Culture is a term that has complexity written all over it. There is no distinct definition to describe the true meaning of culture. Culture can only be described based on the ways individuals choose to portray the term. According to Conley (2011), "Culture is both the technology by which humans have come to dominate nature and the belief systems, ideologies, and symbolic representations that constitute human existence" (p.73). Conley basically says that culture is any belief or idea that is not natural. Human beings tend to continuously develop in ideas, principles, and theologies. Since humans are the main source for the definition of culture, this term rapidly continues to advance in meaning.

When I first hear "American culture," visions of hamburgers, baseball games, barbeques, and the Fourth of July pop into my head. However, American culture has much more to offer than these stereotypical American events and traditions. The American culture is what makes the United States a functioning society. America is such an ethnically diverse country that the culture behind America is an assortment of various traditions, languages, foods, and values. I believe that American culture allows people to have open minds and opportunities to follow their dreams. I was born in Nepal, a small country in Asia, squeezed between China and India. I was five years old when my parents decided that settling in the United States would be the brightest option for my siblings' and my future. The culture that I was brought up with always had such a powerful and positive effect on my choices. My parents did not think that American culture was better than Nepalese culture, but rather that American culture provides more options and opportunities. American culture offers freedom, advanced technology, and--more importantly--education. Nepal's culture has always been weak when it comes to higher education due to the lack of resources and advancements. My family came to America to have a shot at the "American dream." Conley (2011) states that the American dream is, "going to college, obtaining a job, and becoming economically self-sufficient" (p. 87). After living in the United States for twelve years, I am proud to say that the American culture has allowed my family to live the "American dream."

Growing up as a Nepalese-American, I have allowed myself to interlink my Nepalese culture with American culture. I grew up with conservative parents who always made sure my siblings and I knew the basic traditions and celebrations of Nepal. During a birthday, a certain ritual has to be conducted in a certain manner. The ritual cleanses the human body of any impurities and illnesses that may plague the body. Even though we conduct this ritual during birthdays, we also incorporate American traditions during birthdays. When I used to celebrate my birthday in Nepal, I would go through the ritual process for an elongated period of time. However, blowing out the candles to my birthday cake would be very quick and a negligible part of the celebration. Now in America, when I celebrate my birthday, I spend equal amounts of time conducting the ritual and blowing out candles to a birthday cake, and consider both ways of celebrating significant.

In American culture, people tend to step over people or kick books. In Nepalese culture, it is considered degenerate and sinful to step over someone or kick a book. Such actions are rude, and the person doing them is viewed as disgraceful and immoral. This is an example of cultural relativism, in which a person's beliefs should be understood based on their cultural context and should not be judged. Conley (2011) says, "By employing the concept of cultural relativism, we can understand difference for the sake of increasing our knowledge about the world" (p.81). There was one cultural difference that I encountered with my friend where we both gained knowledge and insight about each other's culture. Before I enter

my house, I always take off my shoes because it is unsanitary and filthy to bring outdoor dust and bacteria indoors. I had a mindset that everyone takes off their shoes before entering their home. However, I soon realized that was part of my culture. One day, I went to my Mexican friend's home to do a school project, and when I entered her house, I started to take of my shoes. My friend gave me a peculiar look and asked me why I was taking off my shoes. She told me that I should keep my shoes on if I do not want to get sick. She said that she grew up learning that wearing shoes indoors will prevent aches and illnesses. I was able to gain insight on why she keeps her shoes on in the house, which I did not judge her for.

The culture I was raised with has always shaped my values. My main values are loyalty, pride, family, self-respect, and confidence. These main values are the ones that I follow on a daily basis. Growing up, my family has always been a vital part of my choices and decisions. I make sure that whatever decision I am making will only impact my family positively. I am of a Buddhist faith, so I strongly believe that being loyal will lead to a peaceful and tranquil future. Nepalese parents tend to have an excessive sense of pride. My father always tells me that I should strive to excel in school so I can obtain an outstanding career. Pride, family, and loyalty are three important values that I was raised within my culture. However, self-respect and confidence are values that have changed for me as a young adult.

Self-respect and confidence are both values that I gained from my family, but they also are values that have changed for the better due to my own change in achievement and goals. I had always been a quiet and introverted individual who seemed to be overlooked. Sometimes people take advantage of me because they do not think I have an opinion. Even my family sometimes forgot that I lived under the same roof because I never made a single sound. However, when I entered high school, I learned that without self-respect and confidence, I would not achieve goals that will allow me to become successful. Experiences in high school led to me speak up, have confidence in myself, and have a voice. Freshman year of high school, I took the opportunity to join a cultural dance club. The club members were very carefree and loud, which was extremely overwhelming for me. I was the odd and awkward one of the group. After some time interacting with the club members, I finally had the courage to come out of my shell. By junior year, I had become the president of the club, and I was the loud and obnoxious one! I changed from the shy girl without a voice to a confident leader who had the biggest voice out of all the members.

Overall, culture is what makes each and every individual unique. An individual's culture is built through their upbringing and what they learn as they live their life. Describing my own culture, I would have to say that western culture and Nepalese culture have shaped me to be the way I am today. Through teaching and experiences, I have developed a definition for my culture, which can only be described through my personal experiences and knowledge. Culture may not be natural, but it is what has shaped world society for the better. Culture continues to create an identity for individuals around the world today.

References

Conley, D. (2001). You May Ask Yourself: An Introduction to Thinking Like a Sociologist (2nd ed.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.